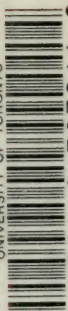


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Skeat, Walter W.  
On the history of spelling

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**On the History  
of  
Spelling**

BY THE REV.  
PROFESSOR SKEAT



HOW HAST THOU WITH MANY A CAUSE FIRST  
NEED IT NEXT MOST MEN CONTEMPT  
WHEN ACCEPT IT AND THE CAUSE IS

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## EXPLANATORY NOTE

**T**HE spellings adopted in the following pages are designed mainly to accustom the reader to a certain measure of change.

They consist, for the most part, in the dropping of manifestly superfluous letters. It is fully recognized that simplification to be of any substantial value, whether in education or in common life, must go much further than this.

But, lest confusion be worse confounded, more fundamental reforms must be introduced with great caution, and after careful study of the complex problems involved. It is one of the objects of the S.S.S. to further this study. In the meantime, it endeavors in its publications to educate at once the seeing eye and the thinking mind.

Many seeming inconsistencies will doubtless be observed by the critical reader; some of them, in all probability, mere oversights. An absolute consistency is unattainable in a transition state, it has not been held necessary to aim at it too sedulously.

But many of the apparent inconsistencies have their reasons, which may or may not be deemed adequate.

The main principles kept in view have been (1) to do nothing which might probably have to be undone in the future; (2) to avoid all spellings which, in the absence of a systematic notation (especially for long vowels and diphthongs), might leave the pronunciation doubtful.

For example: No attempt is made to reduce to unity such forms as light, white, height, or great, late, bait, weight, or beet, bait, deceit, mete, because there is as yet no consensus as to the notation to be ultimately adopted for these sounds.

The second "l" is dropped in "wil" and "spel," but not in "al" or "pull," because it seems likely that "wil" and "spel" may be forms, which "al" and "pul" will scarcely be.

The "gh" is dropped in "taut" because there is no danger of its having to be replaced, and because no ambiguity of sound arises. It cannot be dropped in "ought" or "bought" until the symbol is finally chosen which shall represent the "au" sound.

Final "ce" is usually changed into "s," even at some slight risk of ambiguity, since final "s" in English generally represents the "z" sound. This ambiguity, however, is not serious, and will disappear as soon as the time is ripe for dealing radically with "s" and "z." Let where, as in "since" and "hence," the change would suggest a totally different word, the conventional spelling is retained.

This list of examples might be indefinitely extended, but it is sufficient to show that seeming inconsistencies are not to be taken to mind before they are condemned.

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# ON THE HISTORY OF SPELLING

BY THE  
REV. PROFESSOR SKEAT

WE are permitted to make the following extracts from a lecture entitled "The King's English: from Alfred to Edward VII.,"<sup>1</sup> delivered by our President, the Rev. Professor Skeat, in April, 1902, on the occasion of the Alfred the Great millenary celebrations at Winchester.

"In Alfred's time," said Professor Skeat, "the English language was unknown to all but the inhabitants of England, and a small part of Scotland. Now it is more widely spoken than any other. . . . When Alfred set himself to revive learning in England by superintending translations (from Latin into the vernacular language) of the 'Ecclesiastical History' of the Venerable Bede, the 'History' of Orosius, the 'Pastoral Care' of Pope Gregory the Great, and the 'Consolation of Filosofy' of Boethius, he could never have guessed that the language which he thus fostered would predominate in a new continent, the very existence of which was unknown until six hundred years afterwards."

The lecturer then proceeded :—

"The history of the English language is one of the most fascinating and inexhaustible of all subjects, yet the number of

<sup>1</sup> Published in full in *Saint George*, Vol. V., No. 19, July, 1902, and here reprinted by consent of the author and of the proprietors (Messrs. Fairbairns).

students who have even an elementary knowledge of it is remarkably small. I know of nothing more surprising than this singular fact. The history of English is just the one thing which hardly any schoolboy knows. Very often he can tell you the difference between one ancient Greek dialect and another, and can explain how the speech of Herodotus or Homer differs from that of Thucydides; but to discriminate between the English of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' and that of Barbour's story of King Robert the Bruce is wholly beyond him. He can translate a piece of Cicero or Livy, but can make nothing of a sentence in King Alfred's own words. Just as the schoolboy is taught to look with reverence upon every Latin and Greek sentence, so is he, in only too many instances, left to his own devices as regards his native tongue. When he grows up, he often remains of opinion that the only languages worthy of study are those which are commonly called 'classical,' obviously with the view of prejudicing learners against all others. Yet even in the teaching of that most useful and indispensable language called Latin, the most lamentable habit still prevails,<sup>1</sup> of carefully suppressing all reference to the spoken sounds of the language, and even of encouraging the belief that the Romans in the time of Caesar took their pronunciation from the English inhabitants of London in the twentieth century. . . . I do most fervently hope that one of the subjects introduced in this twentieth century will be the study of phonetics, including the history of the adaptation of written symbols to spoken sounds. Whenever this is done, the study of languages will enter upon a new phase, and all will be brightness and light and knowledge where at present there is a dense and most discreditable gloom."

Professor Skeat went on to show that "the chief points in which Alfred's English differed from our own are these: (1) There is a difference in the dialect employed. (2) There have been great changes in the pronunciation. (3) There have been great,

<sup>1</sup> This is no longer the case. As Professor Skeat remarks in his Inaugural Address on the foundation of this Society, the two great Universities have now united in adopting the reform here urged upon them.



yet wholly inadequate, changes in the spelling. (4) There have been great simplifications in the grammar. (5) There has been a great enlargement of the vocabulary." We reprint entire that portion of the lecture which, dealing with the second and third of these changes, is germane to the work of the Society.

"The *second* point is that, in the course of a thousand years, great changes have taken place in the pronounciation; a proposition which is true, to some extent, of all the other languages in Europe. Of these, the two which have changed most are English and French; and one result is that, in both these languages, the spelling by no means accords with the pronounciation. In both, the forms at present in use frequently represent the sounds of words as they were pronounst several centuries ago. In particular, the sounds of the vowels have so greatly changed that only one of our English long vowels, the second one (*e*), is a pure vowel at the present day; all the rest have become difthongs. In Anglo-Saxon the sounds of the five principal long vowels were the same as in Latin and Italian, viz., *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* (pronounst as in Italian). But the old *a* (ah) is now *ei* (ei), being pronounst like the difthong *ei* in *eight* and *vein*. The old *e* is now pronounst like the *ee* in *feet*, which is a pure vowel indeed, but not the same one as at first. The old *i*, once like *i* in *machine*, is now the difthong heard in *bite*, not far removed from the *ai* in *Isaiah*. The old *o*, once a pure long *o*, has now a slight after-sound of *u*, thus producing the difthong written as *ow* in *know*. The old *u*, once the *u* in *rule*, is now usually a difthong when not preceded by an *r*, as in *mute* or *tune*. At the same time, changes too numerous to be here noticed have taken place in the sounds of the consonants. One of the most extraordinary of such changes is that the old Anglo-Saxon guttural sound of the medial *h*, tho still represented in our spelling by *gh*, is either lost (chiefly after a long vowel) as in *plough*, *bough*, *dough*, *high*, *sigh*, and the like; or else is exchanged for *f* (chiefly after a short vowel) as in *rough*, and *tough*, and *enough*. The sound in Anglo-Saxon was that of the German *ch* in *nicht* or *Nacht*; and there can be no doubt that it perished because the

Vowels

a

b

c

d

e

Conso

h

f

g

Normans, tho they wer determind to lern English, disliked this sound and wholly faild to master it. The chief reason why modern English spelling is a complete riddle to all but a few students is that modern Englishmen are, as a rule, wholly ignorant of the pronunsiation of Latin, of Anglo-Saxon, of Anglo-French, and of Middle English. As a rule, they do not even know that our spelling has a history; and all that they can do is to try to ignore the facts. The strange thing is that they very often feel no interest in the subject, and look upon it sometimes with undeservd contempt. To know all about the correct placing of Greek accents, or the quantities of Latin vowels, is respectfully recognized as a mark of scholarship; but to feel any interest in the history of our nativ language is often regarded as a superfluous meddling with matters of purely antiquarian interest, such as is only pardonable in an enthusiast. Yet some of the results are certainly curious. To take an example, we actually pronouns *go* as 'go,' but if we double the symbol, by writing two *o*'s insted of one, we no longer prolong the *o* sound, but employ quite a different one; so that whilst writing *too* or *soon* with two *o*'s we pronouns them so that the long vowel has become like the long *u* in *rule*. One woud think that a fact so singular woud excite curiosity; but fashion steps in, proclaiming that the study of English is useless or vulgar, for, after all, it is merely our nativ language; and only the classics can confer 'culture.'

"Once more, we spel *oak* with *oa*, and *broke* with *o*; and no one cares. It is lookt upon as a meaningless eccentricity. But if anyone shoud dare to say, 'Then let us by all means disregard it, and spel both words alike', the cry is immediately raised that the spelling is sacred, and must be kept up in the interests of etymology. The retort is obvious, that in that case the etymological meaning of such spellings ought to be studied. But no; Englishmen wil not do that either. They are only satisfied with their spelling as long as they feel that they must helplessly acquiesce in it. They refuse to change it, and they equally refuse to understand it. Let us all lern it by rote, like parrots, is the parrot-cry herd around us; and with that we are commonly content.

“But let us look for a moment at such words as they wer used by Alfred. Insted of *oak*, he pronounst it *āc* (ahk); whilst insted of *brokc*, he used the full form *brocen*, pronounst nearly as *brokken*, with a short *o*, that has since been lengthend and made closer in sound with a light after-sound of *u*. So in other cases, we shal usually find that the modern *oa* corresponds to Anglo-Saxon *ā*: as in *rād*, a road; *wād*, woad; *gād*, a goad; *tāde*, a toad; *ātan*, oats; *gāt*, a goat; *bāt*, a boat; *sāpc*, soap; *lām*, loam; *fām*, foam; *hlāf*, a loaf.

“Again, we write the verb to *heal* with an *ea*, but the substantiv *heel* with double *e*. This is becaus the words, tho now sounded alike, wer once sounded differently; and even to this day, it is not uncommon to hear in Ireland a distinction made between *sea*, pronounst *say*, and the verb to *see*. The words now spelt with *ea* had once a very ‘open’ sound of the vowel, and often appear in Anglo-Saxon with long *æ*, as distinguisht from long *e*: the sound of the former being much more ‘open.’ Or again, we find a like distinction made between the Anglo-Saxon *ēa* and *ēo*, the former produsing the modern *ea*, and the latter the modern *ee*; as in *ēast*, east; *lēaf*, leaf; *strēam*, stream; *bēan*, bean; and, on the other hand, *bēo*, a bee; *thrēo*, three; *frēo*, free; *sēo*, I see; *dēop*, deep; *cnēo*, knee. These examples must serv, for the present, to illustrate some changes in our pronunsiation.

“Thirdly, there hav been great, yet wholly inadequate, changes in our spelling.

“The usual idea current amongst Englishmen, due to an almost total ignorans of the subject, is that the spelling of old English is lawless and worthless. But all depends upon the date. Of cours the spelling of modern English is hopeless enough, but it differs very little from that of the sixteenth century, when it was to a large extent fonetic, but by no means accurate or careful. The spelling of the fifteenth century is not much better, and it is often from this spelling, as seen in old printed books, that some people form their notions. But when we get back to the manuscripts of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, the case is greatly alterd. Many manuscripts are

carefully spelt upon true fonetic principles, so that it is often perfectly easy to read them rightly, and to pronouns the words as they were ment to be pronounst, in accordans with the symbols employd. This certainly cannot be done in the case of modern English, where the same symbol means two or three different things, so that children hav to be informd that, whilst *go* rimes with *so*, *do* rimes with *too*; and that, whilst *toe* rimes with *go*, *shoe* rimes with *do*. In this particular, Alfred's English was immensely superior to our own. When an Anglo-Saxon word is properly written down, there is only one way in which it can be pronounst. The spelling was fonetic; that is to say, a particular symbol ment a particular sound, and no other. The sound might vary according to what precedes or follows the symbol; but if the whole word is placed before you, there is no ambiguity. This is, of course, the principle upon which the excellent Latin alfabet was originally founded, a principle stil preservd in some modern languages: as, for instans, in Welsh. Englishmen often try to raise a silly laugh over Welsh spelling, in entire ignorans of the fact that it is immesurably superior to their own. The only doubtful letters in Welsh are *e*, *u*, and *y*; there is never the slightest dout as to the meaning of the symbols for the consonants. You hav only to realize that we must not judge them by modern English standards, and they are then easily lernt. It does not matter that the sound of *oo* in *boot* is written in Welsh as *w*. What does matter is, that this Welsh symbol *w* should never mean anything els; and it never does, unless when it is shortend to the sound of *oo* in *good*, which is of no great consequens. We do far worse things than that.

"After the Norman conquest, our manuscripts continued to be spelt fonetically, that is to say, correctly, for some time. But, as time went on, many of the scribes wer Normans, who had been traind to write French, and they revized our spelling for us, introdusing new symbols, but unfortunately dropping some of the old ones. For all this, the manuscripts of the erly part of the fourteenth century are fairly wel spelt; and it is often possible to be able to say positively, from the forms employd, in what dialect and in what part of England they wer written. But

about the year 1100, so many old inflexions wer dropt and so many new forms wer thus created, that the spelling did not change with sufficient rapidity, and so became uncertain; and, as time went on, things became worse and worse. In the earlier part of the sixteenth century, a new idea came in, which has wrought sad havoc and disaster, viz., the notion that a word ought not to be spelt according to its sound, but according to its etymology and derivation; and this specious but senseless notion was attended with the worst consequenses. For one thing, the derivations assignd wer frequently wrong; and then a spelling was adopted which was neither fonetic nor etymological, but bad both ways. And this is the system which has ever since gon from bad to worse, and has landed us in the present state of chaos.

“The fact is that most people fail to grasp the one leading principle, viz., that it is *the spoken word* that really matters. Writing was invented for the purpose of representing the sound, and is only useful so far as it does so. The sole true judge is the ear. Yet we actually judge by the eye; we actually go by the look of the thing, and consider whether the word looks like Latin or Greek. If it does that, we call it good, in defiance of truth and logic. Yet whilst we are commonly anxious to spel English in such a manner as to show off our Latin and Greek, we lose sight of the material fact that the bulk of the language is neither of Latin nor of Greek origin, but goes back, in countless cases, to Old Mercian or to Anglo-French, neither of which is at all familiar to the average schoolboy. The plea for ‘etymological’ spelling, falsely so calld, is invariably given up by every true English scholar as soon as he really comes to know the actual facts, and can understand a page of Chaucer or a page of Alfred; but, as such scholars are in a very small minority and are likely long to remain so, there is an overwhelming consensus of opinion in favor of continuing to bear the yoke which the printers impose on us. No improvement is possible til a reasonable and decent acquaintans with our old authors is a great deal more common than it is at present.

“Even our boasted acquaintans with Latin and Greek is

often but a vain thing. We write *sylvan* as if it came from Greek, according to the old false 'etymology' which derived the Latin *silva* from a Greek word ἕλη, which happened to mean the same thing, viz., 'a wood.' But even if there be any such ultimate connexion, the Latin word is only cognate, not derived. So that, if we really want to show off our classical knowledge, we ought to spell it *silvan* at once. We actually write *victuals* when we mean *vittles*, under the impression that the word is derived from Latin; but, as a matter of fact, it is of French origin, and only goes back to Latin at second hand. It is just as absurd as if we were to write *redemption* when we mean *ransom*. And it would be curious to know how many of our classical scholars are aware that *ransom* and *redemption* are from the same original. I hope there may come a time, before the twentieth century closes, when the claims of fonetic spelling will be fairly considered, impartially and logically, and with reference to true etymological facts. It is no small disgrace to us that its claims are now met only with sneers and scoffs, captiousness and prejudice, and by objections that have been exposed over and over again. The great New English Dictionary, now being printed by the University of Oxford, will probably be completed in some seven or eight years; and we shall then possess a storehouse of references for facts that can no longer be disputed. It will make a great difference. Englishmen are very slow to accept new truths: but when they do so, they do it with conviction. Let them once know the truth of a matter, and they will hold fast to it and abide by the consequences."



# SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY

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**T**HE SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY has been founded in order to promote a better understanding of the history of English Spelling and to advocate the gradual introduction of such reforms as shall remove the difficulties placed by our present chaotic spelling in the way of children and foreigners, and to provide teachers and others who are acutely conscious of these difficulties with an organisation for furthering their views.

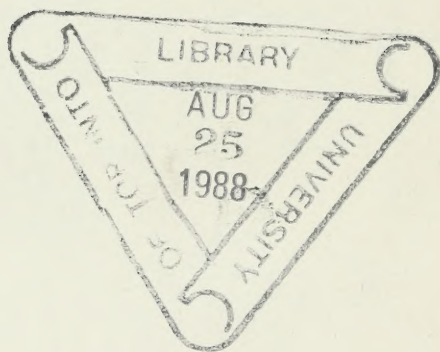
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